

43rd Session of the Conference

Introduction to Item 17: Biennial Theme 2024-25

Water resources management for the *four betters*: *better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life*, to achieve Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals

Water underpins all the Sustainable Development Goals, yet we are facing a global water crisis –water scarcity, droughts and/or floods and deteriorating water quality, aggravated by climate change. Currently, 2.3 billion people live in water-stressed countries, of whom more than 733 million live in arid countries with high and critical water stress. At the same time, some 1.81 billion people are directly exposed to floods, which pose a significant risk to lives and livelihoods, with global flood losses of around USD 20 billion in 2021. Those who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods are often the worst affected, potentially putting their livelihoods, food security and nutrition at serious risk. Between 2008 and 2018, floods caused a total loss of USD 21 billion in crop and livestock production in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). Agriculture, accounting for 72 percent of global freshwater withdrawals, is central to addressing these challenges, which urgently require the development and scaling-up of innovative approaches and increased investments in agriculture and water systems, to adapt to climate impacts and to build resilience in agriculture and rural areas, as well as to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

There is an increased need for better water management in agriculture, for agriculture and by agriculture, recognizing the critical linkages between water, land, climate change, ecosystems, biodiversity, energy, agricultural sub-sectors (crops and livestock production, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture) and food security. Growing demand for water by all sectors triggers the need for understanding the trade-offs and (re-)allocating water through multi-stakeholder dialogues, greater infrastructure investments and effective management, better information and science, innovation and technologies, and stronger capacity and adaptability. In the absence of effective and inclusive governance, increased competition for freshwater can exacerbate already severe inequalities in access and inefficiency in use. Those most at risk are the poorest and most vulnerable groups, such as smallholder farmers, fishers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, youth and women. In the worst cases, increased competition can lead to conflicts at all levels.

It is against this backdrop, with the clear mandates provided in the FAO Constitution – the Basic Texts – that FAO proposes integrated water resources management (IWRM) as an integral and strategic approach to achieving each of the *four betters* - *better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life*, leaving no one behind.

FAO's strategic and coherent IWRM approach to the *four betters*:

Better Production – Increased and sustainable water productivity and water use efficiency, of both rain-fed and irrigated agroecosystems, can generate increased crop yields and productivity (including multiple crops per year) and improved livelihood and nutrition with benefits to smallholder farmers, vulnerable groups and rural communities. Resilience of smallholder farmers and their production systems would increase against climate variability and extreme climate events, such as floods and droughts, through adaptive water management and disaster risk reduction/management measures. FAO seeks to improve livestock, inland fisheries and aquaculture production efficiency and reduce their negative impacts on water as well as strengthen the safe use of non-conventional water resources in agriculture, such as treated recycled wastewater and saline water, in production systems and areas where agricultural production is water-constrained, as well as to conserve water.

Better Nutrition – FAO seeks to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition in all its forms, including promoting nutritious food and increasing access to healthy diets, while optimizing the volume and quality of water used in agrifood production systems. Through the reduction of water pollution, negative impacts on human, animal and ecosystem health can be avoided with particular importance of reducing the incidence of infant and child diarrhea, which is a key cause of malabsorption of nutrients.

Better Environment – Improved management of soils, land, forests, lakes, rivers and wetlands helps to reduce and manage flood risks and droughts and their impacts, increase water harvesting, infiltration and soil moisture retention, recharge aquifers, and contribute to water atmospheric circulation as well as the stability of local water cycles and microclimates. Better water management maintains river flows, improves water quality, quantity and timing in rivers, aquifers and other inland water bodies as well as in coastal areas, contributing to the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity, fisheries, and supporting terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

Better Life – A better life means ensuring access to clean water and sanitation, food security and adequate nutrition, increasing the income and improving living conditions of farmers and rural communities; securing land and water tenure and access to other natural resources, which allow building of prosperous and peaceful communities; and ensuring women’s rights and reducing gender inequalities, benefiting thus the wellbeing of the overall community.

Water in FAO’s future work

Considering FAO’s mandate in working on water, land and agriculture in addressing the global water-climate-biodiversity crises and achieving food security, FAO is in a unique position to support IWRM and to scale up agricultural solutions that link water with climate change action, disaster risk reduction, forest management, ecosystem restoration, biodiversity, soil and land management, nutrition, food safety, antimicrobial resistance and One Water One Health to achieve interwoven benefits and reduce further water risks.

Building upon FAO’s rich experience and comprehensive work on water, and following the guidance provided by the Governing Bodies, a suite of programmatic water initiatives (including those suggested in document CL 171/6) will be implemented in partnership with Members and partners, including within the framework of UN-Water, to advance effective water management in agrifood systems for food security and climate resilience.

These initiatives will support FAO Members in their transition to MORE efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems as outlined in the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, and contribute to the five objectives of integrated land and water resources management:

- effective and inclusive soil, land and water governance;
- conservation, restoration and sustainable use of soil, land and water resources;
- increased adaptation and resilience to climate change and reduced greenhouse gas emissions;
- integrated soil-land-water solutions; and
- optimized soil-land-water data and information systems for agrifood system transformation.

The Conference is invited to:

(i) recognize FAO’s broad mandate in promoting integrated water resources management in achieving its purposes, as defined in the Basic Texts;

(ii) welcome the suggested programmatic initiatives on water and request FAO to fully integrate them in related working areas;

(iii) request FAO to enhance partnerships and mobilize resources to implement these programmatic initiatives; and

(iv) approve the proposed theme: “Water resources management for the *four betters: better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life*, to achieve Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals” for Governing Bodies’ sessions to be held during the 2024-25 biennium.

Ms Maria Helena Semedo, Deputy Director-General